



STATE OF WASHINGTON  
WASHINGTON STATE BOARD OF HEALTH  
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August 28, 2003

Whatcom County Board of Health  
Courthouse Suite 105  
311 Grand Avenue  
Bellingham, Washington 98225

Dear Whatcom County Board of Health:

I am writing to thank you for putting a discussion with the State Board of Health (SBOH) on your July 29, 2003 meeting agenda. I found the discussion to be very informative, as did SBOH Policy Manager Craig McLaughlin. We particularly appreciated that the Whatcom County Board of Health (WCBOH) took so much time for the discussion despite your very tight agenda that day. We left with the impression that Whatcom County is fortunate to have such an engaged and well-informed Board making health policy for the county.

As I mentioned at the meeting, the Board is looking to establish stronger relationships with local boards of health around the state. The feedback we get from local boards will help shape our priorities for future policy work, and they will also inform our work on the *2004 State Health Report*, which will establish health priorities for state health agencies.

I would like to iterate those things that I took away from that discussion, and I would like to hear back from the Whatcom County Board of individual members if we failed to capture there concerns adequately.

The item your members mentioned most frequently was the importance of protecting shellfish beds from contamination from point and non-point pollution. Several board members spoke highly of the Community Oyster Farm Project in Drayton Harbor, praised state agencies such as the Department of Health (DOH) for their cooperation, expertise and funding, and expressed concerns about the continued availability of state resources. They pointed out that two of the three major shellfish growing areas are closed or restricted. (Portage Bay is prohibited and much of Drayton Harbor is either restricted or prohibited.) The third area, Birch Bay, is at risk; three specific areas are now restricted. Losing all three would mean the end of shellfish harvesting and its important contributions to the county's economic and cultural health.

Of particular concern is the future of a state program designed to reduce pollution runoff from dairy farms. The program, which is critical to the recovery of county tidelands, has been very

effective under state Department of Ecology management. A recent bill transferred the program to the Department of Agriculture. Whatcom County board members want to ensure that Agriculture's commitment to this program is as strong as Ecology's had been, and asked if the Board could help. Your Board discussed writing a follow-up letter concerning this issue. I will ask SBOH staff to research the bill, make some inquiries with the Department of Agriculture and communicate their findings.

One WCBOH member asked about our work on environmental justice. We provided her with a copy of the Board's report on environmental justice, and I mentioned both the Board's well-publicized meeting about environmental justice in the Georgetown neighborhood of Seattle, and the interagency workgroup on environmental justice. She asked if I could point to a project or situation where injustice was reduced because of this work. I noted that definitions of environmental justice vary with one's perspective, and that our explicit goal was to improve awareness at government agencies. I said I could not point to a clear case where our work benefited a community.

We also heard concerns about the complex needs of people with mental illnesses, the inadequacy of resources to help them, and the difficulty getting coverage for mental health services. Your members also spoke about the need for local authority to regulate smoking in public places; the importance of adequate and stable public health funding; and increasing access to health care and insurance, particularly for people who don't qualify for medical assistance but cannot afford coverage. These are all areas of longstanding and continuing interest for the State Board of Health. We have addressed them in the past in Board resolutions, reports, special meetings, the state health report, our priority policy work, and both letters to and testimony before the Legislature.

SBOH will consider the concerns of the Whatcom County Board of Health and other local boards of health as we set our future priorities and recommend statewide health priorities to the executive branch of state government. I have asked Board staff to inform the Whatcom County Board of Health of any new activities that speak to the concerns I've noted. When future concerns arise, I would encourage you to contact me, SBOH chair Linda Lake, or any member of the SBOH staff.

Sincerely,

Carl S. Osaki, RS, MSPH  
Member, Washington State Board of Health

cc: Washington State Board of Health Members  
Regina Delahunt, Whatcom County Health Department  
Greg Stern, MD, Whatcom County Health Department  
Craig McLaughlin, Washington State Board of Health